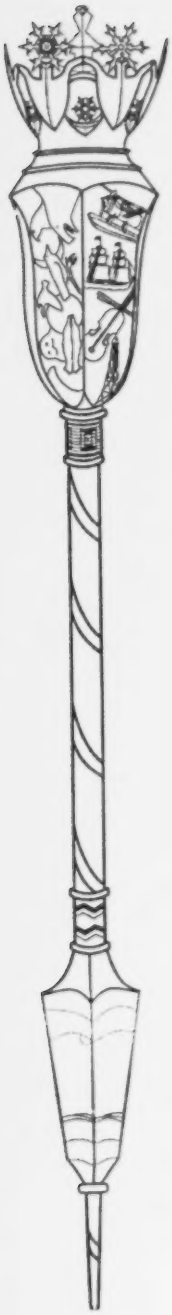
COMMITTEE REPORT NO. 11 14 (4) TABLED ON NOV 5 2001



Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight

Progress Report on Plans and Priorities

Chair: Mr. Charles Dent, MLA

MEMBERS OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT

Charles Dent
MLA Frame Lake
Chair

Floyd Roland
MLA Inuvik Boot Lake
Deputy Chair

Brendan Bell
MLA Yellowknife South

Bill Braden
MLA Great Slave

Paul Delorey
MLA Hay River North

David Krutko
MLA Mackenzie Delta

Leon Lafferty
MLA North Slave

Sandy Lee
MLA Range Lake

Michael McLeod
MLA Deh Cho

J. Michael Miltenberger
MLA Thebacha
(until October 30, 2001)

Steven Nitah
MLA Tu Nedhe

STAFF MEMBERS

Doug Schauerte
Deputy Clerk

Shirley J. Johnson
Director, Research and Library Services

Jacqueline McLean
Committee Coordinator

Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight

105-00373/

NOV 5 2001

THE HONOURABLE ANTHONY (TONY) WHITFORD, MLA
SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker,

Your Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight has the honor of presenting its Progress Report on Plans and Priorities and commends it to the House.

Charles Dent, MLA
Chair

P.O. Box 1320
Yellowknife
Northwest Territories
X1A 2L9
T: (867) 669-2299
F: (867) 873-0432
www.assembly.gov.nt.ca

PROGRESS REPORT ON PLANS AND PRIORITIES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT

INTRODUCTION

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight is a Standing Committee of the 14th Legislative Assembly that was established by Motion at the first session of the 14th Assembly. Committee Members met shortly after being appointed to develop a vision, mission and common set of goals. The *Report on the Operational Planning Workshop* and the *Report on Priorities and Objectives Workshop* were presented in the Legislative Assembly in February and March of 2000.

From the outset Committee Members stated their commitment to making a positive contribution to the 14th Legislative Assembly and to continuing efforts to making government more open and transparent. Members felt that it was important to report to the Legislative Assembly and the public on the priority areas that were identified by the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight as evidence of their commitment.

The fall of 2001 marks the halfway point of the 14th Legislative Assembly. The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight would like to take this opportunity to report to the Legislative Assembly and the public on Committee activities and summarize the progress that has been made in the areas that Members have identified as important early in the term.

THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

The mandate of the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight is to:

a) review issues with government-wide implications;

b) conduct the overview of the budget and the fiscal framework;

c) consider the budgets and financial management of boards and agencies that are outside the responsibility of any Standing Committee including the Office of the Legislative Assembly;

d) examine the reports on the annual financial statements and public accounts of the Government of the Northwest Territories and the Report of the Auditor General;

e) review Government reports on financial and performance results and program evaluation reports to ensure anticipated outcomes are being achieved and accountability is maximised;

f) co-ordinate House Business scheduling and planning in co-operation with appropriate Cabinet representatives; and

g) consider any other matter referred by the House.

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight held a two day operational and planning session followed by a workshop to set priorities and objectives in February and March of 2000. As part of its operational approach, Members agreed on a vision, mission and values statement and set out priorities and objectives for the Committee. These objectives were developed around issues that had government-wide implications and would therefore fall into the scope of the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight. In addition it was agreed that the Committee's objective was to be as open as possible to stakeholders and the general public. Committee has made every effort to ensure that this philosophy of openness has underscored all of its activities.

Government wide issues were identified and articulated as nine goals or objectives:

1. To Achieve progress on constitutional and electoral reform;
2. To advocate for the rights of the Public and those needing a voice in dealing with Government;
3. A Public Service that is representative of the population it serves, and is treated fairly and managed effectively;
4. A more effective government organisation, structure and operations;
5. Survival of Official Aboriginal Languages;
6. A cohesive and current Workers' Compensation system and the associated governing authorities to meet the changing environments;
7. An energy strategy to address the shifting NWT environment and relevant outside influences;
8. A strategy for sharing control of and responsibility for northern resources;
9. To maximise the benefits of recreational activities and to foster the positive effect that recreation has on community health and well being.

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight also has ongoing goals that are explicit in the mandate.

10. The comprehensive overview of the Government of the Northwest Territories' budget and fiscal framework;
11. The consideration of budgets and the financial management of the NWT Workers' Compensation Board, the NWT Power Corporation and other similar government boards and agencies;
12. Examination of the Auditor General reports; and
13. Co-ordination of House Business scheduling and planning in co-operation with Cabinet.

PROGRESS ON COMMITTEE PRIORITIES

A summary of key efforts undertaken in support of each goal or objective is outlined below.

To Achieve progress on constitutional and electoral reform

The sunset clause for electoral boundaries has imposed deadlines for this government. Committee recognised that caucus has the lead but felt that they could play a role in moving the process along. A Special Committee on the Implementation of Self-Government and the Sunset Clause was established during the third session of the 14th Legislative Assembly.

The Special Committee now has responsibility for recommending a course of action to the Legislative Assembly.

To advocate for the rights of the Public and those needing a voice in dealing with Government

The absence of human rights legislation and the potential for litigation dictated that action be taken to advance: 1) human rights legislation, 2) an ombudsman like office to speak on behalf of children, and 3) Access to Information and protection of Privacy Legislation.

1) Human Rights Legislation: Committee advocated for the rights of the public by introducing *Motion 15-14(2) Enactment of Human Rights Legislation* that was adopted by the Legislative Assembly on March 31, 2000.

   Cabinet has responded by undertaking consultation on a draft Bill and has committed to introducing Legislation in the Fall of 2001.

2) Children's Advocate: Committee has not undertaken any significant action in relation to this objective, however the Minister responsible for Health and Social Services has told Members in the Assembly that the Government is moving toward establishing such an office. During a review of the Supplementary Appropriation Act No 1 2001-2002 in Committee of the Whole, June 11, 2001 Ms. Groenewegen was asked if the government was moving towards instituting a Child's advocate in the Northwest Territories. Ms. Groenewegen replied "Yes we are, and that is part of this funding allocations to do the research and development of a proposal for a child advocate, so yes we are." (Hansard, June 11, 2001 p. 147)

   Committee looks forward to hearing more on the Government's proposal in this area.

3) Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Legislation: Committee advocated for the rights of the public to a more open and transparent government by reviewing the *Annual Report and Recommendations of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Commissioner*, and presented the *Report on the Review of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Commissioner's Report 1999-2000* in the Legislative Assembly. This marked the first time that a Standing Committee reviewed the annual report and considered the Commissioner's recommendations. In keeping with Committee's philosophy of openness and public involvement meetings were open to the public. Committee Report 2-14(4) was read in the house on October 4, 2001. The Government's response to Committee's Report and recommendations is pending

Future Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Annual Reports will automatically be referred to the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight.

A Public Service that is representative of the population it serves, and is treated fairly and managed effectively

Committee researched the advantages and disadvantages of public service commissions in other jurisdictions. Efforts to call attention to the poor Affirmative Action results, hiring practices and government-wide human resources management practices included a theme approach for members' statements and question period culminating in passage of *Motion 5-14(3) Establishment of a Public Service Commission*. The Executive Council commissioned *The Human Resources Management Study* (The Thornton Report) in response to the motion and transmitted the Report to Committee.

Although the Government has not formally responded to the recommendations in the Thornton Report, the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight reported to the Legislative Assembly on June 12, 2001 with a Preliminary Committee Report 4 - 14(4), which included recommendations for a process to continue to work with the government to achieve a professional public service.

Since the Committee Report was presented there have been on-going discussions between Committee and the government, and Committee is hopeful that an agreement will on the process to move this forward will soon be reached.

A more effective government organisation, structure and operations

Committee had anticipated receiving the Program and Functional review concerning departments, boards and agencies and looked forward to assessing the effectiveness and efficiency related to service delivery. Of particular interest were the organisation and structure of Health and Social Service Boards, Education Councils, and the Department of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development. The Minister responsible for Health and Social Services commissioned the Cuff Report to examine the role and structure of

both the Department and the Boards. The Cuff report is presently before the Standing Committee on Social Programs.

Motion 14-14(2) Request for Comprehensive Audit of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development was defeated in the Legislative Assembly.

Committee was offered a briefing on Regional Reorganisation by letter in June. To date, however, the Government has advised us that they are not ready to actually deliver the briefing.

Survival of Official Aboriginal Languages

The Official Languages Act called for a mandatory review every 10 years with one due during the 14th Legislative Assembly. A Special Committee on the Review of the Official Languages Act has been established.

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight will continue to review the Annual Reports of the Languages Commissioner.

A cohesive and current Workers' Compensation system and the associated governing authorities to meet the changing environments

The Division of the Territories and outdated Legislation dictated the need to review the Workers' Compensation System over the life of the 14th Assembly. The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight advocated for such a review, and the Minister responsible for the Board responded by making a commitment to conduct public hearings and prepare appropriate legislation for introduction and passage during the life of this Assembly.

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight looks forward to reviewing the results of the Panel's hearings and to new updated Legislation being introduced.

An energy strategy to address the shifting NWT environment and relevant outside influences

Committee urged the Executive Council to develop a comprehensive energy strategy, by leading a campaign to call attention to high cost of energy, green house gas emissions and the need for alternative energy options.

Committee Members noted that previous Assemblies had called for the government to develop a strategy in view of significant energy costs in the Northwest Territories and the need to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions. Through its efforts to heighten awareness and draw attention to energy issues and concerns, Committee was successful in having the Legislative Assembly adopt a motion calling for the Development of a Comprehensive Energy Strategy.

The Government has responded with the establishment of an Energy Secretariat in June of 2001 and the announcement of a Special Advisor to the premier to head up the Secretariat.

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight is generally supportive of the government's exploration of hydroelectric potential both as an alternative to fossil fuel consumption and as a revenue source.

A strategy for sharing control of and responsibility for northern resources

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight supports the Government in its approach to resource revenue sharing, and the work of the intergovernmental forum. Committee will continue to participate and represent the public interest in future discussions.

To maximise the benefits of recreational activities and to foster the positive effect that recreation has on community health and well being.

Committee Members investigated the distribution of lottery profits and the effectiveness and co-ordination of sports organisations in contributing positively to the social problems in communities. Through a series of briefings and presentations by various sports organisations Committee Members became better acquainted with the roles of each of the organisations.

Although Members of the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight remain interested in this issue the Standing Committee on Social Programs assumes the lead.

Other Activities

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight tackled several other issues as they arose and urged the government to take action accordingly. Here are a few of the highlights of these activities:

Committee lobbied the Minister responsible for Education, Culture, and Employment to overturn the decision to assess federal Fuel Rebates as income for social assistance recipients.

- The Minister reversed the decision and the Department of Education, Culture, and Employment issued rebates to approximately 320 families.

Committee urged Executive Council to improve literacy levels in the NWT and introduced a motion adopted by the Legislative Assembly to develop a comprehensive Literacy strategy.

- Government responded with *Towards Literacy: A Strategy Framework,* which proposes to provide $2.4 million dollars annually.

Committee urged the Premier to set the example for prudent financial management by reducing the interim budget for the Department of the Executive by $100,000 in fiscal year 2000/2001.

- The Premier instructed the Minister of Finance to bring forward the appropriate motion to reduce the amount of the interim appropriation by $100,000

Committee worked to have the Minister responsible for Education, Culture, and Employment reinvest $1,000,000 identified departmental savings in income support programs in fiscal year 2000/2001.

- $700,000 was re-invested into the program.

Committee advocated on behalf of surviving spouses who remarried prior to April 17, 1985 by urging the Minister responsible for Workers' Compensation Board to negotiate a lump sum settlement.

- A negotiated settlement was reached with five identified surviving spouses and the Minister brought forward the necessary Legislation.

OVERSIGHT AND REVIEW OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight presented its Report on the Review of the Report of the Auditor General to the NWT Legislative Assembly for 1999 on June 5, 2001. The Report included a follow up to the Review of the 1997 and 1998 Auditor General's Report. Committee noted that the Government is expected to follow up on all initial and subsequent recommendations contained in the Report.

The Committee would like to see more timely tabling of the Public Accounts and will work with the Executive Council to achieve this goal.

CONDUCT THE OVERVIEW OF THE BUDGET AND THE FISCAL FRAMEWORK

This role is intended to improve the business planning and expenditure management information provided to the Legislative Assembly. Committee has recommended a sharpened focus on results, increased transparency of information and a process for public involvement in preparation of the Business Plans.

OTHER MATTERS

Openness and Public Involvement

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight is committed to a government that is more open to stakeholders and the general public. In pursuit of this objective the Committee looks for opportunities to open meetings to the public. In addition, Internal Committee documents are often appended to Committee Reports when the issue is ready for presentation in the Legislative Assembly to allow the public to better understand the background leading to recommendations. During this Legislative Assembly the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight's Report on the Business Plans has been tabled for the first time along with the Committee Report on the Main Estimates.

Theme Days

In the past two years Committee Members used "Theme Days" as a way of working together to publicise, heighten awareness, and bring focus to issues of public concern. During the time allotted for Members statements and during question period Members would focus on a particular issue. The rules of the Legislative Assembly allow a period of time for Members of the Legislative Assembly to make a 2 1/2-minute statement on any matter.

Question period is typically one of the most publicised parts of the Assembly's proceedings and it provides an opportunity for Members of the Legislative Assembly to call attention to public issues. During question period MLA's ask ministers questions about government activity in order to seek out information. The responses are a way of making information about the government's activities public.

Members prepared several theme days on important public issues, including:

- Student Financial Assistance
- Health & Social Programs
- Greenhouse Gas and Resource Development
- Human Resources and Public Service Commission
- Literacy
- Water Quality
- FAS/FAE
- High Cost of Energy

Water quality, for example was of concern to Committee Members for a variety of reasons including contaminated drinking water in communities, inadequate and unsafe sources of water supply, ageing municipal water systems, and a drastic increase in insurance rates for municipalities. Members made statements and raised questions on water supply, quality, training and certification, water quality standards and environmental concerns.

As a result, the government has taken steps to address many of the issues raised including an examination of municipal systems and standards.

NEXT STEPS

The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight met on September 11, 2001 to review the work undertaken to date and to plan for the next fifteen months of business. Members reviewed the Vision statement and reaffirmed that:

> *Our vision is to be responsive and accountable to the public by acting with integrity to contribute to the achievement of the 14th Legislative Assembly's Vision.*

The Mission statement was revised to better reflect the proactive role of committee, not merely a role in which Committee responds to government initiatives. Committee agreed that:

> *Our Mission will be to take purposeful action to support, question or oppose Government initiatives and to hold Government accountable; we will also propose that Government take action where appropriate and in the public interest*

Within the context of the revised Mission statement Members revised the Goals and Priorities of the Committee. They are:

- To Advocate for the rights of the Public and those needing a voice in dealings with Government
- To have a Public Service that is representative of the population served; that is treated fairly and managed effectively
- To work toward effective government organisation, structure and operations
- To see a cohesive and current Workers' Compensation system and governing authorities to meet the changing environment
- To develop an Energy Strategy to address the changing NWT environment and outside influences
- To see a strategy for sharing control of resources including non- renewable resource development, and environmental impacts and liabilities of development.
- To develop a diversified long term fiscal outlook for the GNWT
- To advocate for Adequate Housing for residents
- To advocate for reduced cost of living for residents

- To support the development of prevention measures and promote awareness of the detrimental effects of FAS/FAE

Ongoing goals that are explicitly included in our Mandate were revised to reflect the recommendation that the Annual Reports of several statutory officers be referred to Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight. They are:

- Conduct the Overview for the budget and fiscal framework
- Consider budgets and financial management of NWT Workers' Compensation Board, NWT Power Corporation and non-assigned boards and agencies.
- Examine Auditor General reports
- Co-ordinate House Business scheduling and planning with Cabinet.
- Review as necessary and appropriate, annual reports of Statutory officers of the Legislative Assembly including Commissioner of Official Languages; Conflict of Interest Commissioner; & Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Commissioner

CONCLUSION

The Government of the Northwest Territories is a non-partisan, consensus system of government. The Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight allows Regular Members of the Legislative Assembly a mechanism to scrutinize the policies, programs and spending of the Government. Members of this Committee do not treat this responsibility lightly and we will continue to advocate on behalf of the public. We will urge consultation and collaboration as a fundamental theme to guide each of the priority areas.

Members believe that residents want this government to move forward toward achieving a better tomorrow. We also believe that residents want this government to do so in a manner that is fiscally responsible, prudent, and in the public interest. We will urge government to develop budgets and strategic investments that promote a strong northern economy and secure financial future.

As an integral part of a non-partisan, consensus system of government, Members of the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight will continue to make a sincere and determined effort to work with the government to succeed in achieving a Better Tomorrow.